Economic & Political WEEKLY

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Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra by Gopal Guru
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Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 33, No. 7 (Feb. 14-20, 1998), pp. 339-340
Published by: Economic and Political Weekly
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4406405
Accessed: 17/09/2013 09:05

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Of Mudhouse Cultural Activists and Cultural Hierarchies

Sharmila Rege

Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra by Gopal Guru; Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai, 1997.

THE book under review, a documentation of the dalit women's cultural assertion and an analysis of the post-1980s decline of the dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra, is welcome, particularly at this political juncture. On the one hand hindutva forces project a homogenised brahmanical Hindu identity in a bid to woo the dalit and bahujan votes, and some of the most radical of the 'panthers' seem to have surrendered to the calls of the 'tiger territory'. On the other, the forces of globalisation project a homogenised, seemingly secure, globalised consumer identity. Yet the caste question, like never before, seems to have come to the centre of political processes as an issue of redistribution of power and justice. The separate political assertion of dalit women's organisations has been significant in drawing attention to the inseparable nature of the caste and gender question in India. That dalit political parties, organisations and feminists came together in giving a call for the celebration of December 25, the day on which Babasaheb Ambedkar burnt the *Manusmriti*, as Indian Women's day, is a case in point. For all those who still continue to conceive the caste question as 'identity politics' and a politics of recognition, and thereby political economy and culture as a mechanical dichotomy, Guru's analysis underlines the inseparability of the structures of the political economy and meaning of cultural reproduction.

Guru begins with a critique of a binary analysis of culture into the great and little tradition. Such an analysis loses out on the critical tensions that exist within the categories designated as 'great' and 'little'. Within the dalit cultural movement, the literary revolt of the writers and poets of the 1970s, no doubt provided a rich source of critical energies. However, even as there was a regression in this revolt and considerable co-option by the state, dalit culture came to be understood only in terms of the dalit literary movement. The result has been an academic and political invisibility of 'other' modes of dalit cultural assertion and their being subsumed under the literary mode.

The study is located in the Akola district in the Varhad region of Maharashtra. This region has a long history of cultural assertion which is known to have sustained a radical dalit mass politics against the brahmanical and capitalist forces as embodied in the Congress Party. Moreover, it was one of the first regions to respond to the Buddhist conversion movement. In undertaking an analysis of the relationship between the cultural assertion and dalit politics in both its Ambedkarian and post-Ambedkarian phases, issues of the changing form and content of the dalit cultural forms, its social base in terms of caste and gender, have been highlighted. At the onset, the author raises three significant issues: (a) can dalit cultural expression be homogenised, (b) can a mode (mainstream dalit culture) that reproduces the cultural hierarchies of its adversaries be conceived as resistance, and (c) can the radical cultural alternatives be sustained in the context of the regression of the dalit movement in Maharashtra.

The first section goes into a documentation of the cultural assertion in the pre-Ambedkar phase. Despite the fact that within the feudal caste-based order the mahars had to ply music for the entertainment of the dominant, castes, there are ample examples of these 'songs' being the modes of resistance when performed within the boundaries of the maharwada. This phase is particularly marked by the 'powada' (ballad) about Shalini, a dalit woman who it is believed killed the landlord who sought his sexual right over her. The valorisation of Shalini became a critical source for the 'shahirs' (composers of ballads) is obvious from the numerous ballads available within the oral tradition on this theme. There is reason to believe that the bhakti tradition proved to be an important source for the shahirs, both in terms of the content and the form. This continued to be so even in the Ambedkarian phase of the movement. This phase is marked by the 'kalapathaks', the performing troupes of dalit cultural activists 'going public' and taking up issues beyond the immediate relevance. Cultural activists such as Keruba Gaikwad, Dinbandhu, Srawan Bapu, played an important role in spreading Ambedkar's message of revolt against enforced caste-based occupations, and inculcating the value of modern education, science and rationality in dalit community. Particularly significant are the assertions that popularised the greeting, 'Jai Bhim', contested the notion of 'harijan', and critiqued the demand for a separate state of Vidarbha.

The popularity and expanse of the kalapathaks reached its peak between the period 1957-75. There were more than 25 kalapathaks performing during this period. The themes were mainly centred around the teachings of Buddhism, the land-grab movement led by Dadasaheb Gaikwad, the material exploitation of dalits by rich peasantry, and the much needed support for the candidates of the Republican Party of India. If earlier the local cultural activists had drawn upon the compositions of the more urban-based shahirs, this phase saw the strengthening of the local resources in scripting and organising of the kalapathaks. The kalapathaks also took up the issue of dalit women's harassment by the in-laws, and projected the militant daughter-in-law against the brahmanical reformist rendering of the always-victimised-woman. Yet, as Guru points out "...this form also fulfilled the hidden patriarchal agenda and the need of keeping the female out of the kalapathak tradition" (p 5). The author almost justifies this by arguing that it was the "hangover of the 'tamasha' in which the dalit women performed dance in order to entertain the feudal lords...these memories...led the dalit patriarchy to impose cultural restrictions on dalit women who did not play female part in the kalapathak programmes". Such an explanation overlooks important gender issues involved even in a politically progressive appropriation of cultural forms, and has important clues for understanding the collusions and contestations between savarna and dalit patriarchies. To recognise the fact that the 'jalsa' came to be marked out as a politically progressive form as against the tamasha, after it came to be 'de-sexualised' via the exclusion of the 'nachees' (female performers), is in no way an undermining of its political significance. On the contrary, it underlines the hegemony of the brahmanical and bourgeois patriarchal values that operate on the dichotomies of wife/whore and nachi/nartaki.

The last section charts the decline of the kalapathak tradition in the 1970s. The colonisation of the dalit movement by the state, the decline of the dalit political movement and the invasion of the electronic media are mentioned as the main causes of the decline. Guru stresses the fact that dalit

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leaders after Ambedkar never recognised the importance of the cultural activism, and there was gross neglect of that tradition and the practitioners. The dalit literary revolt played a crucial role not only in creating new metaphors and challenging the bastions of Marathi literature but also in offering a revolutionary alternative that contested the state appropriation of the movement. This dalit literary tradition by the 1980s became 'mainstream' and soon reached a state of stagnation, having now lost its avid middle class readership on the one hand, and on the other, being unable to reach out to common dalits. This tradition not only completely neglected the dalit popular forms but later even came to condemn them for drawing upon the bhakti tradition and the tunes of popular Hindi cinema. The cultural hierarchies that emerged between the 'mainstream' dalit literary camp and the 'mudhouse' cultural activists are explained in terms of the blind imitation of the project of modernity by these writers. The author criticises the literary camp for getting into patrochial, personally gratifying politics, and failing thereby in converting their literary mode from an experiential (of how they came to be dalit) to a cultural resource for counter-hegemonic struggles, at least for its urban readership. Though the analysis is well taken, the 'conspiracy' of these literary figures to undermine the dalit masses seems a little overdrawn (p 33).

The decline in the male kalapathak tradition is marked by the breaking of 'cultural silence' by dalit women of the Vidarbha region. Guru presents a collection of 'ovi' and 'palana' (traditionally female forms of expression) composed by dalit women. In a significant contribution, he draws attention to the changes in the cultural idioms that women composers brought about, and highlights the vast 'political' canvas of these compositions. Particularly interesting are the comparisons between Nehru and Ambedkar, and the regional variations in the dalit women's conception of Babasaheb's marriage to a brahman woman. The first hand documentation of the oral tradition of ovis and palanas composed by women has revealed to the author significant details about the emergence of these compositions from the mahila mandals of the Buddhist cultural movement. These dalit cultural women activists draw upon the rich repertoire of the male composers, and significantly radicalise the content even as they keep to the given 'female' forms of cultural expressions, is a significant point to note.

One wishes that the author had not assumed a readership familiar with the cultural ethos of Maharashtra and had given more explanatory notes, and probably a section on the caste-based cultural forms of expression. One also feels let down by the absence of a discussion explicity addressing the three crucial issues raised in the earlier section. However, it is a significant contribution for all those who seek to conceptualise the 'popular' without collapsing it into the 'mass' and thereby redefine the boundaries of cultural studies in India. The documentation of the compositions of the dalit women is a rich resource for feminists involved in working out of alternate epistemologies. In times of a boom in post-modern cultural studies, this book is heartening as it puts back politics into the exercise of doing cultural studies.

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